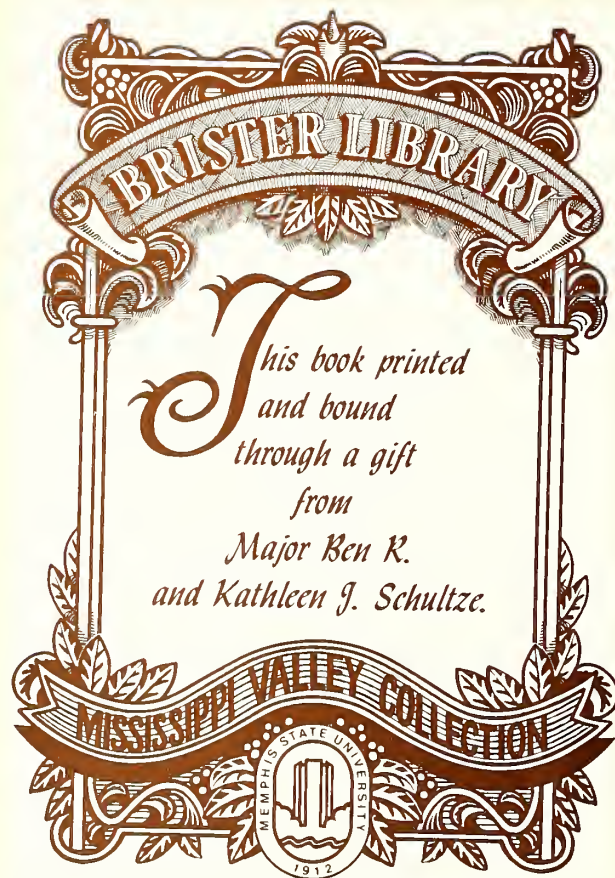


HISTORY OF MEDICINE IN MEMPHIS  
INTERVIEW WITH  
DR. EUSTACE SEMMES

BY - RICHARD M. CALDWELL  
ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE  
MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY





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HISTORY OF MEDICINE IN MEMPHIS

INTERVIEW WITH DR. EUSTACE SEMMES

NOVEMBER 6, 1980

BY RICHARD M. CALDWELL

TRANSCRIBER: BETTY WILLIAMS

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE

MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY



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MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY  
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE 38152

Oral History Research Office

TELEPHONE (901) 454-2524

February 7, 1989

TO: Michele Fagan  
FROM: Charles Crawford

SUBJECT: Dr. Eustace Semmes Interview

Several years ago the Oral History Research Office sponsored some interviews in a project, "History of Medicine in Memphis." On November 6, 1980, an interview was conducted with Dr. Eustace Semmes by Richard M. Caldwell. The form to release this interview for research use has been lost subsequently, but it was the understanding of Dr. Semmes and Mr. Caldwell that the interview would be part of the collection for research use. Dr. Semmes has died and we are unable to contact Mr. Caldwell at this time. According to our last report from him, he left Memphis to accept a job somewhere in Texas. Accordingly, I am glad to release the interview for use by this letter.



THIS IS THE ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE OF MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY.  
THIS PROJECT IS "AN ORAL HISTORY OF MEMPHIS' FIRST NEURO-SURGEON."  
THE INTERVIEW IS WITH DR. EUSTACE SEMMES. THE DATE IS NOVEMBER 6, 1980  
AND THE PLACE IS MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE. THE INTERVIEWER IS RICHARD MILNOR  
CALDWELL, HISTORY STUDENT AT MEMPHIS STATE. TRANSCRIBED BY BETTY WIL-  
LIAMS. INTERVIEW # 1.

DR. SEMMES: Speaking of grandparents, I don't know much  
about my mother's side of the family, but I  
do know about my grandfather on my father's side because I lived with  
him most of the time. He was retired for many years after the Civil  
War.

MR. CALDWELL: What was his name?

DR. SEMMES: His name was B.J. Benedict Joseph Semmes.

MR. CALDWELL: The names of your grandmother and grandfa-  
ther could you just give me those? Your  
mother's mother and father and your father's mother and father?

DR. SEMMES: Well, my father's father was Benedict Joseph  
Semmes and my mother's was Albert de Lava-  
lette. He was in the navy and died just before the Civil War; other-  
wise, he would have been fighting us because he came from Philadelphia.  
That was his home.

MR. CALDWELL: Well, maybe that is best that he died.

DR. SEMMES: He picked up my mother's acquaintance when he  
was in charge of the shipyards in Pensacola.



MR. CALDWELL: And that was your mother's mother and father?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: What are the names of your father's mother and father?

DR. SEMMES: I just told you, it was Benedict Joseph.

MR. CALDWELL: Do you know when and where they were born?

DR. SEMMES: No, but they came from Georgetown next to Washington on my father's side.

MR. CALDWELL: All right. His name was Benedict Joseph Semmes. Now speaking still of your grandmother and grandfather, did you know them personally?

DR. SEMMES: On my father's side yes. I spent a good deal of time with them when I was young. He was retired and they took me around for my health and one thing and another.

MR. CALDWELL: Well, what do you remember about them?

DR. SEMMES: My grandfather as long as he lived wore Confederate gray. He bought his clothes from some place down in Georgia and they made only one color.

MR. CALDWELL: That's the only color they made and he wore it all the time, huh?

DR. SEMMES: Yeah. He was very pleasant. He took the Manchester Guardian paper until he died and read every bit of it.

MR. CALDWELL: Do you know where he served in the Civil War or what outfit he was with?





DR. SEMMES: Yes, I know that he was wounded in the shoulder at Chattanooga and after that he was in command of the Confederate forces at Atlanta.

MR. CALDWELL: So after they retreated from Chattanooga, he went to Atlanta.

DR. SEMMES: Yes, and he was there during the siege.

MR. CALDWELL: I bet that wasn't very pleasant! Did he tell you anything about being there?

DR. SEMMES: Well, I got a lot of information from his letters that were kept by one of my cousins in which he described the whole proceeding to his wife who was then down in Mississippi.

MR. CALDWELL: And that is what is preserved in another book (Last Train from Atlanta) about your family.

DR. SEMMES: Yes. It was a very brutal thing. The women and children were still in there when they were bombarded and it was tragic and a bloody affair.

MR. CALDWELL: That picture in "Gone with the Wind" where they are all laid out on the street might not be too far wrong! I think in Memphis--you know Justines in Memphis?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: The Justines in Atlanta is built from the house "Tara" that was the main house in

[Another book was written by Admiral Semmes, great uncle of Dr. Semmes, called Service Afloat.]



"Gone with the Wind". After the movie, they tore it down and that is Justines in Atlanta.

DR. SEMMES: How interesting!

MR. CALDWELL: When did your grandfather die? Do you know when he died?

DR. SEMMES: No, but he got pretty senile before he died.

MR. CALDWELL: What were your parents' names? Your mother's maiden name also?

DR. SEMMES: Maude Duval.

MR. CALDWELL: That was her maiden name.

DR. SEMMES: She was the belle of Memphis.

MR. CALDWELL: How do you spell that last name?

DR. SEMMES: D-U-V-A-L.

MR. CALDWELL: It's French.

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: Okay, what was your father's name?

DR. SEMMES: Raphael Eustace.

MR. CALDWELL: Okay. Do you know where they were born?

DR. SEMMES: My father was born in Memphis. My mother was too.

MR. CALDWELL: Both of them were born in Memphis?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: Do you know what year they were born in?

DR. SEMMES: No.





MR. CALDWELL: They must have been born in the 1850's before the Civil War.

DR. SEMMES: Now let's see. I can figure up a little bit from. . . I was born in 1885, yeah.

MR. CALDWELL: I know it was 1885.

DR. SEMMES: I was the second child.

MR. CALDWELL: So your parents were probably born in the 1840s?

DR. SEMMES: It must be somewhere around there.

MR. CALDWELL: Do you know when your parents died and what year?

DR. SEMMES: My father died I think in '57 [1927] of influenza. My mother died at childbirth.

MR. CALDWELL: She did. Was that after you, I guess? You have how many brothers and sisters?

DR. SEMMES: There were six of us altogether. I was the second.

MR. CALDWELL: So when the sixth child was born, she died?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: Are they buried here in Memphis?

DR. SEMMES: Yes, all of our family are buried here at the Calvary Cemetery. They have a place for me yet.

MR. CALDWELL: That will be a long ways off.



DR. SEMMES: I hope. (Laughter)

MR. CALDWELL: What was the educational level of your parents?

DR. SEMMES: My grandfather and my father graduated from Christian Brothers College here as did myself and my son.

MR. CALDWELL: Boy, I wonder when Christian Brothers was founded?

DR. SEMMES: It's been a long time.

MR. CALDWELL: A good while back.

DR. SEMMES: It was the only higher education place in Tennessee then.

MR. CALDWELL: Okay, did your mother receive any type of formal education?

DR. SEMMES: I think she went to St. Agnes. Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: Now still speaking of your parents, was education valued as an essential process to individual development and future success of a person during your parents' generation?

DR. SEMMES: Well, it was considered essential by all of our family.

MR. CALDWELL: Okay. In your family, education was highly sought after and looked for.

DR. SEMMES: My grandmother was very well educated. She



still spoke French and she corrected all our errors in history and everything else. She was an orphan, but her ward was in charge of the church at the head of Wall Street. Our family portrait is still there.

MR. CALDWELL: On Wall Street?

DR. SEMMES: At the head of Wall Street.

MR. CALDWELL: Now that is in New York?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: Your family put a lot of emphasis on education. Do you think your parents in that respect were different from most people and most families?

DR. SEMMES: I think most families believed in education.

MR. CALDWELL: You said your father went to CBC. What type of education did he receive at CBC? Now it is probably more technical, more engineering.

DR. SEMMES: An average college degree.

MR. CALDWELL: Okay. So it would be when he went to school he would get the Liberal Arts degree?

DR. SEMMES: Yes. Nearly everybody in this part of the country went to CBC in those days.

MR. CALDWELL: As far as agricultural type of education, they didn't really receive that type?

DR. SEMMES: No. They were all city people.

MR. CALDWELL: They were all city people and they were





getting the general education?[Dr. Semmes:  
Yes] Where in the country, you'd probably get the agricultural or  
technical type of education?

DR. SEMMES: My father studied law at Georgetown.

MR. CALDWELL: After he went to CBC, he went to Georgetown  
to study law?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: So by profession he was a lawyer?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: What was your mother's occupation?

DR. SEMMES: Raising six children.

MR. CALDWELL: Okay, that's a good enough one. (Chuckle)  
That took some doing there.

DR. SEMMES: I remember her. I was 8 years old when  
she died and she was a very attractive wo-  
man.

MR. CALDWELL: That's her picture in your room?

DR. SEMMES: Uh-huh.

MR. CALDWELL: All right. Your father was a lawyer and  
after Georgetown he came back to Memphis?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: Where was his office located? Do you know?

DR. SEMMES: On Front Street, but he didn't practice law.  
His grandfather was a wine merchant and



needed help--[the grandfather] had his brother there and so he started helping him out and just stayed with it.

MR. CALDWELL: So he was a wine merchant?

DR. SEMMES: He imported all kinds of wines and advertised the sale in Poetic Italian.

MR. CALDWELL: That was the wine concern owned by your grandfather?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: Now who was he?

DR. SEMMES: He was B.J. Semmes--Benedict Joseph Semmes.

MR. CALDWELL: What was the name of the wine company?

DR. SEMMES: B.J. Semmes and Company.

MR. CALDWELL: You all make it easy. (Laughter)

At least, it was named after family, sometimes they name it after other connections. So he worked up there his whole life at B.J. Semmes Wine Company?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: Did he ever tell you what he did at work?

DR. SEMMES: I saw what he did.

MR. CALDWELL: All right, what did you see?

DR. SEMMES: He had to do with the wine part of it. My uncle had to do with the whisky part. I remember my father never drank anything. He'd take a sip of wine or whiskey or something out of a glass and spit it out.





MR. CALDWELL: He just made it; he didn't drink it, huh?

That may have been good, he was around it all day long. He might not have gotten too much done if he was tasting all day long. Now speaking of the wine business that they were in and in general, what types of machinery and what innovations were invented during your parents' generation which made their work and others easier? Did they have any machinery in the wine factory that was considered new machinery or something to make. . .?

DR. SEMMES: No, that was all imported. They didn't make any or use any American wines.

MR. CALDWELL: They were really a distributor of wines. They imported, warehoused and distributed it.

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: Where did you live in Memphis?

DR. SEMMES: We lived up on Shelby Street which is Front Street below the curve. There were a whole lot of families that lived up there.

MR. CALDWELL: Would that be going south?

DR. SEMMES: South, yes. We could hear the drays banging on those cobblestone streets and the drays--you know what a dray is, don't you? [Mr. CALDWELL: No.] The thing was one with two wheels and a mule in front and it carried cotton bales back and forth.



MR. CALDWELL: Kind of a two-wheeled cart?

Now there's a curve up there now. Would that be close to where Hohenberg Brother's Cotton Company is now?

DR. SEMMES: No, all that was still in the cotton business. It was farther south almost to Vance Street.

MR. CALDWELL: Is your house still standing--your original house?

DR. SEMMES: No, it has been torn down, but it stayed there for a long time. My mother's uncle also lived up there. I suppose that's where she lived and went out socially and so did my father. That's where they met.

MR. CALDWELL: So in that neighborhood by. . .

DR. SEMMES: The bank presidents and people like that lived up there.

MR. CALDWELL: That'd be about like Front and Vance?

[Dr. SEMMES: Yes.] And that would be--a rough date on that would be--were you born in 1885? [Dr. SEMMES: Yes.] Still 1850 to 1860 that's when their house would have been there?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: Okay, it has changed a little bit, hadn't it?

DR. SEMMES: It sure has. (Laughter)



There was a doctor there on the street just below our house and he used to tell me about the epidemics of yellow fever and what they did with them. My grandfather had a light case and after that he worked with them [burying crew]. They buried them on the sandbar because it was easiest to dig out and then when the river rose it would wash them on down.

MR. CALDWELL:                    Since your father had that mild attack then he was immune to it, wasn't he? Grandfather, I mean--he was immune to it?

DR. SEMMES:                    Yes.

MR. CALDWELL:                    I've got to ask you a lot more about downtown when we get there. Do you remember anything about downtown Memphis at that time, you let me know because. . .

DR. SEMMES:                    The river was full of cotton steamboats, and there'd be ten or fifteen of them at one time at the bluff.

MR. CALDWELL:                    That's where the cobblestones that go down to the river, that's where they have the cotton sitting. Was Front Street at that time pure cotton merchants almost or were there other types of warehouses?

DR. SEMMES:                    All cotton.

MR. CALDWELL:                    Do you want to take a break and rest your voice?



DR. SEMMES: Do you think they'll be able to understand it?

MR. CALDWELL: Oh yeah, it'll be easy to understand. You're coming through just fine. In your house, did you have coal oil lamps?

DR. SEMMES: No, we had gas lamps.

MR. CALDWELL: Now, did that change while you were growing up to electric lamps or electricity?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: So you went from gas lamps to electricity in your house? How about the plumbing in your house? Did you have. . .

DR. SEMMES: We had hot and cold water.

MR. CALDWELL: You did have hot and cold water?  
[Dr. SEMMES: Yes.] And it ran into the Mississippi River?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: Did you all have an outhouse?

DR. SEMMES: No, we had an upstairs bathroom.

MR. CALDWELL: You all were all modern, weren't you? Did you notice any type of new innovations of machinery that came into being say in your early childhood or during your parents' generation?

DR. SEMMES: I remember the preacher--priest in this





case--bringing a gramophone over to the house playing it for us. It looked just like the picture of the little dog and the big megaphone. It was just like that!

MR. CALDWELL: And that was a priest--the local. . . . ?

DR. SEMMES: St. Peter's.

MR. CALDWELL: St. Peter's before it moved out to mid-town?

DR. SEMMES: St. Peter's is still up there where it started.

MR. CALDWELL: Where is it?

DR. SEMMES: It's on Third and Adams.

MR. CALDWELL: Did you notice anything else that was coming into usage?at that time?modern machinery?

DR. SEMMES: Well, that was about the time that the transportation in Memphis, it was on buggies and horses and various sorts of transportation. Most of the things were small buses pulled by mules. At the bottom of Vance Street where it goes up the hill, we had an extra mule down at the bottom to help pull the thing up and he walked back down ready to pull up the next one(load).

MR. CALDWELL: Oh, he was just kind of a fixture there, huh? Somebody owned him and did you pay?

DR. SEMMES: Yes, he belonged to the city.

MR. CALDWELL: Belonged to the city. They had a mule there



to help everybody up the hill.

DR. SEMMES: Yes. There was a streetcar company also locally owned and the manager was one of my cousins--one of the Semmeses.

MR. CALDWELL: The local streetcar company?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: And that was a mule-drawn streetcar?

DR. SEMMES: No, that was electrical car there. (Looking at some pictures).

MR. CALDWELL: What was your cousin's name there?

DR. SEMMES: I don't know--Semmes though. (Laughter)

MR. CALDWELL: Well, of course! Did your parents adjust to the new machinery and innovations that

were introduced? Did they prefer electricity over the gas light?

[Dr. SEMMES: Yes.] Did they prefer the electric cars over the buggy?

[Dr. SEMMES: Yes.] The hot and cold water I think everybody would like. (Laughter) So you think that over all they accepted the new innovations and enjoyed them because it made their life easier and more pleasureable?

DR. SEMMES: Yes. My father was very fond of music.

While he didn't play anything, he used to have meetings at our house that I remember well--local musicians and any visiting people. If the opera was here, he would invite some of them to come out and they would come. I used to sit at the head of



the stairs and listen to the music below. I think that is where I got fond of music.

MR. CALDWELL:                   How big was your house? With five brothers and sisters. . .

DR. SEMMES:                    I think they had four bedrooms.

MR. CALDWELL:                  High ceilings and ceilings, say 15 ft. tall?

DR. SEMMES:                    Yeah.

MR. CALDWELL:                  And that was a residential area, you say?

DR. SEMMES:                    Yes.

MR. CALDWELL:                  Then everybody just went north to Front Street to work.

DR. SEMMES:                    I remember some of the people up there. One of them was Van Vleet--McKay Van Vleet--we were chums when we were young and his sister. I pulled her off the top of the fence and spanked her. (Chuckle)

MR. CALDWELL:                  I'm going to move on to different types of clothes. What styles of clothing were worn by your mother and father?

DR. SEMMES:                    I think a good deal like they are now except not bare and open like they are now.

(Laughter)

MR. CALDWELL:                  They would cover up more than we do?

DR. SEMMES:                    Yes, very much more.

MR. CALDWELL:                  But it would still be. .would it be a suit



and tie or a three-piece suit? For the women?

DR. SEMMES: Three-piece suits mostly. I notice a picture of my father with a vest on.

MR. CALDWELL: They liked the vests. And your mother, could you describe some of her clothes?

DR. SEMMES: I think she dressed very conservatively.

MR. CALDWELL: You could see her hands and her face and her ankles?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: Today, we have different types of material--polyesters and synthetic types of material.

What would be the material?

DR. SEMMES: It would be silk and cotton.

MR. CALDWELL: That would be the main ones?

DR. SEMMES: Yeah.

MR. CALDWELL: Cotton for the outer garment most of the time and silk for the undergarment and then the fancy coats?

DR. SEMMES: Yeah.

MR. CALDWELL: People liked cotton for some reason down here, huh? (Laughter)

Would there be certain types for special occasions that parents would dress differently or what I would consider dress up and use different





types of clothes?

DR. SEMMES: When they would go to a party?

MR. CALDWELL: Well, what would they wear to a party that would make it unusual?

DR. SEMMES: The man wore tail suits and the women had a low cut dress as a rule.

MR. CALDWELL: Would that be low cut in the back or front or both?

DR. SEMMES: Both.

MR. CALDWELL: But nothing like the low cut today? [Dr. SEMMES: No.] It'd still be just above the breasts?

DR. SEMMES: It wouldn't show the breast at all.

MR. CALDWELL: But that was pretty flashy back then huh?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: What types of food did your family eat?  
We have our cans and fast foods that you can throw in the oven type stuff.

DR. SEMMES: We didn't have so many cans. We had dried things. I know we had dried codfish for breakfast on Fridays. Not too unlike what we have now. We had bacon and eggs for breakfast.

MR. CALDWELL: Grits? Did you all have grits and like grits?



DR. SEMMES: Yes, we had grits.

MR. CALDWELL: Say, at lunchtime or at noontime or mid-day if your father was working or you were growing up, what would be some of the typical?

DR. SEMMES: He used to eat up at the Tennessee Club.

MR. CALDWELL: Was that a big meeting place for business people to meet and eat?

DR. SEMMES: Yeah.

MR. CALDWELL: At nighttime what did you all have at night time?

DR. SEMMES: We would have a regular dinner--steaks.

MR. CALDWELL: Do you think people back then ate more vegetables?

DR. SEMMES: I believe so.

MR. CALDWELL: Were there special times of the year when your family would get together and have dinner together? Say like people's families meet at certain times of the year now. Did you have that then?

DR. SEMMES: Occasionally, but not too much. We lived here and the different families had business and their friends and they were sort of independent of each other.

MR. CALDWELL: So the Semmes had one part having dinner with itself and another part of the Semmes



having dinner with itself. Usually it was not a big gathering of Semmes?

DR. SEMMES: Not too much.

MR. CALDWELL: Your independent spirit still exists today, doesn't it?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: Kind of see each other and wave and go on to your business?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: You've mentioned that you ate a lot of dried food. Could you tell me how the food was prepared?

DR. SEMMES: We always had a cook.

MR. CALDWELL: Say you had one black cook working for you. And were there any other people working in your house?

DR. SEMMES: We had, I remember particularly two German women--one a nurse and one a cook--one took us down to the Tennessee Brewery. I remember getting this big mug of beer and holding it in the steam because it was too cold. It was cold from storage.

MR. CALDWELL: It would get that cold from just storing?

DR. SEMMES: Yeah.

MR. CALDWELL: It would be buried underneath the ground?



DR. SEMMES: No. We had ice. You know we had ice cream frequently. I remember turning the freezer with a colored boy we had. You'd take turns.

MR. CALDWELL: But the lady who cooked your meals and one of your other helpers in the house, they were both German women?

DR. SEMMES: Yeah at the time.

MR. CALDWELL: Then you had a colored boy help you?

DR. SEMMES: Yes, he used to have to bring coal upstairs and we took turns carrying it.

MR. CALDWELL: At one time in Memphis, the German population was a very prominent part of Memphis.

How did you store the food?

DR. SEMMES: We had an icebox. Ice would be delivered by some big delivery wagon.

MR. CALDWELL: All right and then you put it in the ice box?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: How long did the ice last in the ice box? Did you get a big chunk of it?

DR. SEMMES: Yes, it lasts a long time.

MR. CALDWELL: I know a lot of people don't think that ice boxes were too efficient, but they were really very efficient, weren't they?





DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: They were just layers and layers of wood, wasn't it?

DR. SEMMES: No, I think we had sawdust in them or something like that.

MR. CALDWELL: So in between the wood you put sawdust down. They had one guy on TV, everybody is concerned about insulating their houses. He's a guy 14 years old in high school and he did a study of onions and he wants to take the part of the onion that nobody uses and use that as insulation and press it into a board type thing. (Laughter) Once it is processed, it doesn't smell too bad. Your house wouldn't have bad breath or anything!

Going back to your parents, what types of travel did your parents do? Or what did they use to travel in their day?

DR. SEMMES: Well we went on trains. We used to go up to the mountains of North Carolina and the coast in the summer.

MR. CALDWELL: So the train was for long distance. Say, going about the city, what types of travel would they use?

DR. SEMMES: They walked a lot of the time--it wasn't far. They rode in carriages and buggys, on horseback.

MR. CALDWELL: Did you have horses at your home?



DR. SEMMES: No, we didn't have any. We had to rent one.

MR. CALDWELL: Do you think people walked more at that time?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: Since this is the end of summer, how did you keep your house fairly cool so you wouldn't just die from heat?

DR. SEMMES: When we lived on Shelby Street, we had very high ceilings and the real 3 ft. thick walls of brick which would insulate itself and we never suffered from the heat up there.

MR. CALDWELL: A house like this without air conditioning would be a hot house--say 8 ft. ceilings. That's one reason for the high ceilings--the heat. It was more ventilation. Did you get uncomfortable sleeping at night?

DR. SEMMES: No.

MR. CALDWELL: You mentioned you went to North Carolina by train. Would that just be for vacation?

DR. SEMMES: We would spend the summer. One time I stayed there 18 months. I was there and the family came up two summers. I stayed there between them. I was puny at that time.

MR. CALDWELL: About what year was this or how old were you?



DR. SEMMES: Oh, I was about 10 or 11 or 12.

MR. CALDWELL: Did you like those mountains?

DR. SEMMES: Yeah, I like both North Carolina and on the coast. That's where I got acquainted with Dr. George Lefever, who was professor of Zoology at Missouri. They took me everywhere they went on their biological studies and taught me how to use a microscope. That was when I was 8 years old.

MR. CALDWELL: That was the person who influenced you.

DR. SEMMES: To go to medicine and to go to Johns Hopkins.

MR. CALDWELL: What would be the reason for your parents traveling outside of Memphis besides vacations? Did they ever travel outside of Memphis very often?

DR. SEMMES: No, there wasn't much outside of Memphis.  
(Laughter)

MR. CALDWELL: No, unless you wanted to talk to the cotton plants, huh! (Laughter) So basically, they stayed in Memphis and did their work and didn't go to North Carolina.

DR. SEMMES: My father went out to the west for some purpose and it had to do with the military. I think there was some sort of riot out there and he belonged to the Chickasaw Guards here. He was gone about a week or two.

MR. CALDWELL: What were the Chickasaw Guards?

DR. SEMMES: That was a outfit here in Memphis, sort of



a social military affair that young men belonged to.

MR. CALDWELL: So it really wasn't a part of the Department of War?

DR. SEMMES: During the Civil War there was a regiment that was gotten together and commanded by one of my uncles, Warfield Semmes. That was called the Bluff City Grays. They were a very famous regiment during the Civil War. They were tough guys.

MR. CALDWELL: So then from that outfit came the Chickasaw Guards?

DR. SEMMES: No, beforehand.

MR. CALDWELL: They were two distinct things?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: Chickasaw Guards was in a way a social club?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: Did they have uniforms they wore?

DR. SEMMES: Yes, they did and they drilled and all.

MR. CALDWELL: Were they gray uniforms hopefully?

DR. SEMMES: I don't believe so. I think that was before the gray.

MR. CALDWELL: Say you traveled by train, what would be the most difficult part of that train ride?

DR. SEMMES: The cinders that would come in the window





that the engine blew out. You'd get cinders in your eyes.

MR. CALDWELL: Would it burn your clothes up?

DR. SEMMES: No, it would just get in your eyes.

MR. CALDWELL: I bet it took a long time to travel to North Carolina from Memphis by train? One day or two days?

DR. SEMMES: I think it was a day and a half.

MR. CALDWELL: Would you stop in Nashville?

DR. SEMMES: It would stop a good many places. But I think it went through Chattanooga.

MR. CALDWELL: All right, back to your family life at home and let's say it is dinner time. I guess that's when everybody would be together or breakfast when everybody would be together. Did your family talk about your family and community events, politics and religion?

DR. SEMMES: Not too much.

MR. CALDWELL: You all were just like most families, you just ate and went your own way?

DR. SEMMES: Yeah.

MR. CALDWELL: Did your family like to have discussions together though?

DR. SEMMES: They used to have nicknames for me.

MR. CALDWELL: What was your nickname?



DR. SEMMES: Billy for Billy O'Brien the kicker. That was the one of baseball O'Brien's that was very loud. They claimed I asked more questions than anybody in the world.

MR. CALDWELL: You were always asking questions huh?  
That's why they gave you that nickname huh?

DR. SEMMES: Yeah.

MR. CALDWELL: Did your parents, I guess I am comparing it, say, with my grandparents or my grandparents' parents. My grandmother said that all they did their whole lives was work and even when they were enjoying or relaxing they were doing things about the house. They were working all the time. Did your parents basically do that? Or did they have time when they could just forget about their work and just have some entertainment?

DR. SEMMES: Yes, they could.

MR. CALDWELL: What would they do for entertainment?

DR. SEMMES: My father took all of us children to the opera and any other show like that that came that was worthwhile he took us all to it routinely.

MR. CALDWELL: What would be some of the other types of events?

DR. SEMMES: I can't remember his name now--a great big tenor and also a baritone, I mean a bass. Some guy that was a bass. Then of course the women singers we always



went to see.

MR. CALDWELL: Your family had a real interest in education and music, didn't they?

DR. SEMMES: Yes. I think my father was a writer. I've never been able to find anything that he's written. Walter Malone used to come out to our house frequently at night. He used to come out to our house frequently and spend the evening. I remember when they were writing the The Opportunity.

MR. CALDWELL: That's the book you mentioned. What's does that book say? What is that book about?

DR. SEMMES: That book was just too sober.

MR. CALDWELL: It described how to take an opportunity and use it?

DR. SEMMES: Yes, haven't you read it recently?

MR. CALDWELL: No, I had just heard of it when you first mentioned it. (Cassette was turned)

(CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)



MR. CALDWELL: So they read the book, Opportunity, which was a book about how to use an opportunity for yourself?

DR. SEMMES: Yes, it covers a good deal of territory.

MR. CALDWELL: Okay, would it be quotes that they gave and sayings that they made and reflections upon life--their view of life also?

DR. SEMMES: Yeah.

MR. CALDWELL: We've talked about how your parents and grandparents traveled, what types of communication were used other than (trains)? Did they use river traffic very much?

DR. SEMMES: I've gone to New Orleans a couple of times on steamboats with the family, and once or twice with other people.

MR. CALDWELL: How long would it take on a steamer down there?

DR. SEMMES: I've forgotten, but I think it took all night and part of the morning to get started.

MR. CALDWELL: All they have now is barges, you can't really go down the river on a boat that you stayed overnight on.

DR. SEMMES: I think they still have one down there, haven't they?





MR. CALDWELL: Yes sir they have one that all they use it for taking people under the Mississippi River bridge and it goes a couple miles downstream to President's Island and Ensley Bottoms and things like that. Now was the telegraph still in use?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: That would be the major form of long distance communication until the telephone came in?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: Was the telegraph office fairly near your house? Was it on Front Street somewhere?

DR. SEMMES: No, it was up there on Monroe and Second.

MR. CALDWELL: At Monroe and Second? [DR. SEMMES: Yeah.]

That would be the only way to communicate long distances, wouldn't it? [DR. SEMMES: Yeah.] Besides letters which I am sure was a little bit slower at that time. The phone didn't come around until...Did you have a phone in your house, say in 1915 or 20's?

DR. SEMMES: I don't believe so.

MR. CALDWELL: I believe my grandmother said they got one 1930 or so. Besides the opera and your father's writings, did your parents have other hobbies or interests that they introduced you to or they engaged in?



DR. SEMMES: Now, my father didn't hunt or fish.

MR. CALDWELL: Where most people probably at that time did hunt or fish didn't they?

DR. SEMMES: Yes.

MR. CALDWELL: That would probably be the two main hobbies.

DR. SEMMES: His brother was quite a hunter.

MR. CALDWELL: I'm fixing up my boat right now--a little boat I bought--me and another guy were painting it olive drab so we can go hide from the ducks when we give them a welcome and hopefully eat some ducks.

DR. SEMMES: I've killed many a duck. I don't think hunting is inhuman because that is quickest way to die and everybody has to die and every duck has to die. Those that you shoot probably get out better because if they didn't keel right over dead we would shoot the second time.

MR. CALDWELL: So you like to duck hunt? [DR. SEMMES: Yes.]  
Where did you go duck hunting around here?

DR. SEMMES: We had a place over there near. . . We had 500 acres and we kept it flooded so that the ducks could live in there.

MR. CALDWELL: Boy, you had 500 acres flooded for ducks?

DR. SEMMES: We used it to entertain our doctor friends from all around this part of the country.

MR. CALDWELL: Boy, you all had quite a hunting ground--500



acres! That's every man's dream!

DR. SEMMES: And we sold it recently and made a \$150,000.

MR. CALDWELL: And it's probably still used for duck hunting too!

DR. SEMMES: No, it's raising cotton now.

MR. CALDWELL: Your family was a well-known family in Memphis.

DR. SEMMES: We have a street named after us.

MR. CALDWELL: Semmes Street.

DR. SEMMES: Yeah, it runs down from the country club south.

MR. CALDWELL: Right over there off of Southern, isn't it?

DR. SEMMES: Yeah.

MR. CALDWELL: How would people show respect to your parents and to your family? I guess when they walked along the street, I guess they were always greeted by people?

DR. SEMMES: As I recall it I knew nearly everybody that passed Main and Madison for a long time.

(Chuckle)

MR. CALDWELL: You knew all of them and they knew you?

DR. SEMMES: Yeah.

MR. CALDWELL: Since your house was on Front Street where you played and grew up was basically in



that area.

DR. SEMMES: No, it was Shelby Street. It was a continuation of Front though.

MR. CALDWELL: So your playground and your youth area was what we consider the industrial area of Memphis now.

DR. SEMMES: At night people used to come up from the river and yell and make a whole lot of racket and so we got together and decided to shoot out the window the next time they came up and they were coming up yelling and carrying on. Then everybody's window went up and there was the damnest bombardment you ever heard. (Laughter) They never came there anymore!

MR. CALDWELL: That would be the people from the river coming up. You all got rid of them, didn't you? (Laughter) Do you remember any songs that your mother sang to that your father enjoyed--particular favorite songs that they liked?

DR. SEMMES: He enjoyed all kinds of music. When this crowd would come--the musicians--they would sit around and play half the night. They would have some refreshments or something and then come back and play again until midnight or after.

MR. CALDWELL: Did your parents have any poems that were favorite poems to them that they passed along to you.

DR. SEMMES: Nothing except this book, Opportunity.





MR. CALDWELL: Do you remember any instances about your parents' lives that they related to you and that you remember that you would like to tell. Anything about their lives or what they did or what they thought or people they met.

DR. SEMMES: My father was a gentleman in all his reactions and he was very good to me. I remember every time we had a difference of opinion between us he would always give in. I remember when I had finished my second year at Missouri he asked me if I had considered going to Cornell which would take me when I had had two years of medical school. And I said, "No, I want to finish my four years at Missouri and go to Johns Hopkins which will only take you with a degree".

He said, "Fine." He was supporting me all the time.

MR. CALDWELL: He was always supportive of you?

DR. SEMMES: Yeah, until I had been out in practice two or three months. Then when I came here, they were so glad to get a neurosurgeon. The only surgeons here and all the doctors began to send me all their neurosurgery right away. So I got busy and I stopped doing anything else. I had some experience in general surgery--my training--but I wasn't going to operate on their patients and let them send me their's.

MR. CALDWELL: So you were established as a medical doctor in neurosurgery in Memphis.

DR. SEMMES: Yes, I was appointed to the school and



began to teach the students neurosurgery right at once.

MR. CALDWELL: That would be the University of Tennessee?

DR. SEMMES: Yeah.

MR. CALDWELL: Had it been in Memphis very long?

DR. SEMMES: Yeah. But I was the first neurosurgeon.

MR. CALDWELL: You were the first neurosurgeon in the city of Memphis?

DR. SEMMES: In the South really except for Atlanta. There was one man in Atlanta.

MR. CALDWELL: Did you know him? [DR. SEMMES: Yes, we were good friends. His name was Fincher.] So what year was that, that you were being established as a neurosurgeon?

DR. SEMMES: I think 1912.

MR. CALDWELL: I remember that year well. (Laughter) Your mother, you say, died in childbirth? You did not know your mother very well then?

DR. SEMMES: Yes, I remember her a good deal.

MR. CALDWELL: Since you were the second child, you. . .

DR. SEMMES: I remember once I had a sty on my eye and she said that she had heard that to rub a wedding ring on your sleeve until it got hot and then hold it on it and it would make it go away and get well. She did it for me and it got well.



MR. CALDWELL: So there was a little difference between say when you were born and when she died at childbirth? You had enough time to know her some?

DR. SEMMES: Yes. I remember her sitting and rocking in a chair mending things at the same time.

MR. CALDWELL: Did your father ever marry again?

DR. SEMMES: After forty years, yes.

MR. CALDWELL: He waited forty years? You can't rush these things, you know! You had a supportive family of you and your other brothers and sisters?

DR. SEMMES: I did, yes.

MR. CALDWELL: What were the names of your other brothers and sisters?

DR. SEMMES: My oldest sister was Julia and myself.

The next one under me was Mary Anita. We called her "Manita" Mary Anita Semmes. Then the next one was Maude Duval Semmes. She was a brilliant blonde. We attributed it to the Castile department of France. All up there had gold hair--real golden and just light. Newspapers used to take pictures of her on the street and things like that. The next one was Alberta Lavalette Semmes. The last one--a boy--was Lavalette Duval (L.D.) Semmes.

MR. CALDWELL: When your mother died in childbirth did the baby also die?

DR. SEMMES: No.



MR. CALDWELL: That was L.D.? Childbirth at that time was dangerous, wasn't it?

DR. SEMMES: Yeah, I never did give the (?) credit for doing everything right.

MR. CALDWELL: At that time medicine was not very well developed in that area? If it hadn't been for modern science, I wouldn't be alive. Because I was born 10 weeks premature in 1951 and weighed 2 1/2 lbs was in an incubator for 3 months.

DR. SEMMES: Yeah.

MR. CALDWELL: If I would have been born when you were born, I would have died because it was the modern technology of modern science that saved me. My mother almost died and if it hadn't been for modern medicine she would have died. We were very fortunate.

DR. SEMMES: Way back before that, it was almost fatal to go to a hospital to have a baby because they all got infected. They didn't know what was infecting them because it was the hands of the doctor.

MR. CALDWELL: A hospital was not looked upon as a safe place, was it?

DR. SEMMES: No, it wasn't for a child.

MR. CALDWELL: The best place to be born was in your home?

DR. SEMMES: By a mid-wife or something?





MR. CALDWELL: Probably with a mid-wife, they probably know more about cleanliness than the doctors did at that time.

DR. SEMMES: Very likely.

MR. CALDWELL: How big was Memphis when you were growing up?

DR. SEMMES: Oh, I think about 60,000 or something like that. A pretty good sized town!

MR. CALDWELL: That would be at that time still one of the biggest cities in the South, wouldn't it?

DR. SEMMES: Yeah. They tell me in the old days that women all went to Holly Springs and to Germantown to get their clothes. Memphis was just a river town. Nothing in it was anything special!

MR. CALDWELL: It was a rough town to live in.

DR. SEMMES: Still is.

MR. CALDWELL: Still is. (Chuckle) At that time the river would have attributed to its coarseness. Now, it is probably the overpopulation of the people in too small an area. I'm through with anything I am going to ask you in this part.

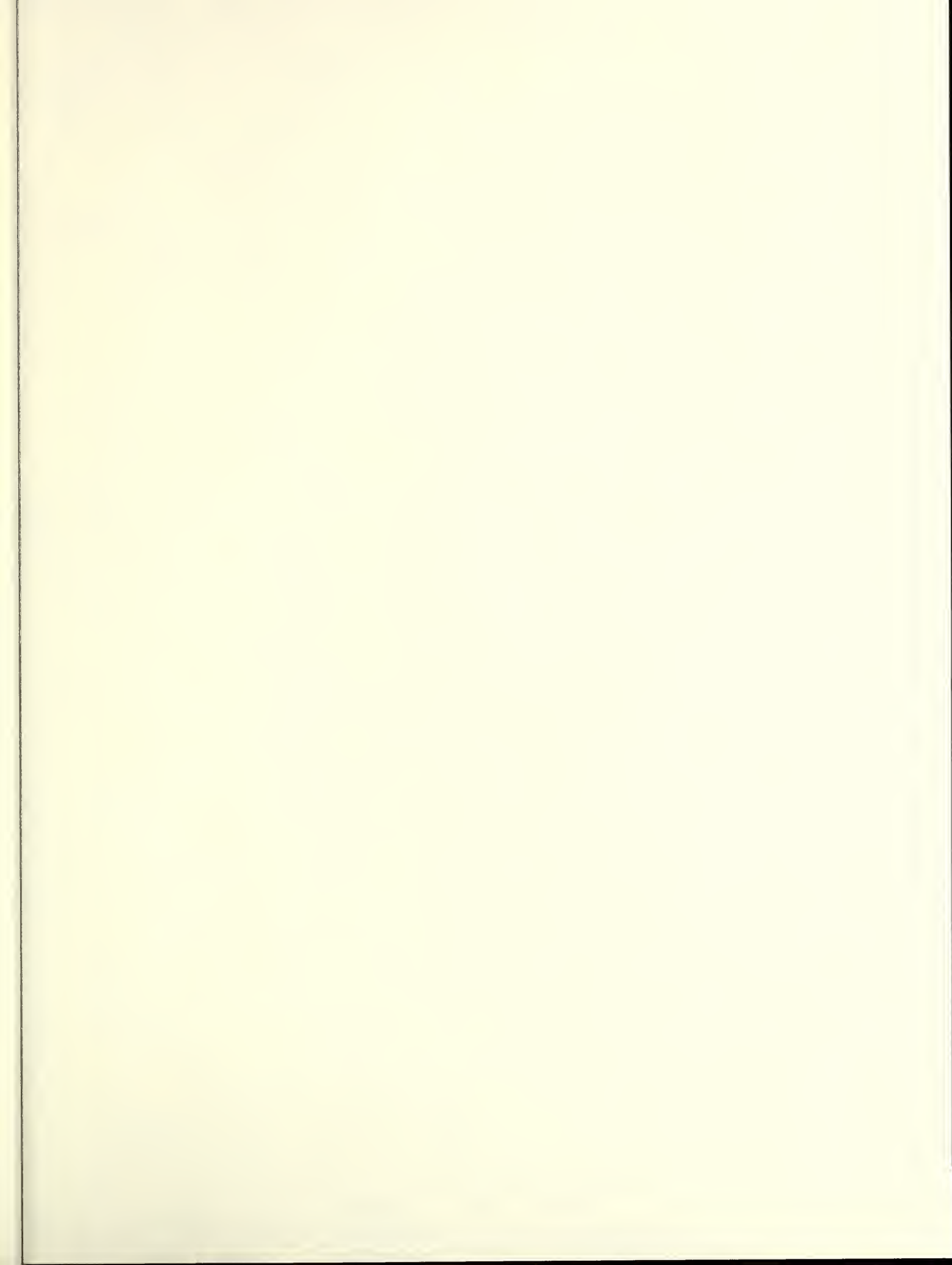
DR. SEMMES: Well, I better start on you then. What are you going to do with this?

MR. CALDWELL: Well, I'll turn this off.











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